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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000695

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/16/2016

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SUBJECT: OLMERT'S SEPARATION PLAN

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

This is a joint Embassy Tel Aviv/Consulate General Jerusalem cable.

1. (C) Summary: On February 7, Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave an interview in which he said that Israel is moving toward separation from the Palestinians, and toward defining Israel's final borders. He explained that he plans to uphold all GOI commitments on unauthorized outposts -- presumably to the USG to remove post-March 2001 outposts. He also remarked that Israel will keep the main settlement blocs west of the separation barrier and the Jordan Valley, and maintain a united Jerusalem. Palestinian and NGO contacts opined that his plan is a continuation of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan, and that they now expect to see accelerated construction of the barrier and in the settlement blocs. End summary.

Olmert Outlines His Vision
On Outposts and Settlements

2. (U) Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on February 7 gave his first interview of the campaign season on Channel 2, in which he discussed, among other topics, unauthorized outposts and the settlement blocs. On outposts, Olmert said that he would uphold all commitments the GOI has made -- presumably to the USG to remove post-March 2001 outposts -- that he would uphold the law, and that he would implement court orders (to dismantle outposts). He remarked, however, that he would maintain a dialogue with the settlers, probably to avoid violent confrontations with them in future evacuations. He defended the use of force against settlers at Amona on February 1 by saying that the Israeli public agreed with the GOI's behavior, and by mentioning that he had asked the settlers to implement the demolition orders themselves, but the settlers "replied with a categorical no."

3. (U) While not pointing out specific locations where he expects Israel's border with the West Bank to be in the future, Olmert asserted that Israel is moving toward a separation from the Palestinians, and toward determining the final borders. According to Olmert, Israel "will converge on the main settlement blocs." He explained that he would maintain a united Jerusalem, that the Ma'ale Adumim, Gush Etzion, and Ariel blocs are all or will be a "part of the State of Israel," and that giving up the Jordan Valley would be irresponsible. Olmert fell short of calling his vision another unilateral disengagement, however, because he has not "given up on the road map." He insisted that the Palestinians must fulfill their road map obligations to stop terrorism, "foster a democratic processes, and maintain full transparency in their dealings."

Olmert Continuing Sharon's Legacy?

4. (C) Khaled Elgindy, policy advisor for the PLO's Negotiations Support Unit, told ConGen poloff February 13 that Olmert's plan is not new; it is a continuation of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan that will not be acceptable to the Palestinians. He complimented Secretary Rice's recent statements that any future

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determination of final borders between Israel and the West Bank will need to be reached by bilateral negotiations. Elgindy also commented hopefully that since Olmert does not have a military background, and was once mayor of Jerusalem, he could be expected to be more flexible than either Ehud Barak or Sharon, and that he would have a better understanding of the centrality of Jerusalem for the Palestinian people. (Note: As an aside, Elgindy questioned why the GOI did not evacuate all the settlers from Amona or Hebron. He indicated that any future evacuations of outposts or settlements would face stiff resistance from settlers, who have promised to at least double the amount of protestors. He also opined that evacuations would be better timed after the March 28 elections, since the evacuations may be viewed as electioneering on Olmert's part, and may provide ammunition to right-wing parties like Likud. End note.)

15. (C) Jessica Montell, executive director of B'tselem, told ConGen poloff on February 13 that she expects the GOI to accelerate construction of the separation barrier and construction in settlements west of the barrier -- Ma'ale Adumim, Modi'in Illit, Ariel, and Gush Etzion blocs. She said that a unilateral decision regarding Ariel will be hard for Palestinians to digest because of its geopolitical significance: Ariel is another location which can effectively divide the West Bank. She also pointed out that one area of concern is the Jordan Valley, which has a small population and represents nearly one-third of the West Bank total land, but is de facto cut off from the rest of the West Bank. She claimed that the IDF imposes severe restrictions on the movement of Palestinians to the Jordan Valley by forbidding their entry and only allowing entry to those Palestinians listed as residents of the area. Montell added that many Palestinians who reside outside of the Jordan Valley but have farmland there sometimes have trouble accessing it because of checkpoints and other obstacles to movement.

16. (C) Dror Etkes, settlement watch coordinator for Peace Now, told ConGen poloff that Olmert announced his plan on February 7 to turn the Israeli elections into a de facto referendum on disengagement, which Sharon never held during Gaza disengagement. He opined that Olmert does not want to say too much now in order to avoid scaring away potential voters who may swing between him and the Likud party. Etkes said he is uncertain about the future, adding that the GOI may get rid of outposts altogether, and may be forced to deal with the issue sooner than it wants.

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